A COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK

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THE BOWYER BIBLE

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in memoriam

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A1. BOWYER BIBLE PRINT 4217. MARK THE EVANGELIST. FRENCH SCHOOL

A. INTRODUCTION

The first Petrines worshipped in the Temple and the synagogue with their fellow Jews. Then they started to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. Their message would have been something like this:

"God has demonstrated that Jesus of Nazareth is His Chosen One by raising him from the dead. The New Age is about to dawn. Repent, believe, and receive the Holy Spirit so that you may be saved when God comes to judge the earth - as he will very soon."

The response of their Jewish audience was: "Prove it!"

So the Petrines turned to their Bible - the Jewish Bible - and to the prophecies of Isaiah and others and said, "Jesus has made these prophecies come true!" So the proof of the Messiahship of Jesus consisted of extracts from what was now the "Old" Testament, and the Petrine Party used them as the basis for their preaching. But soon the "Christians" came to be ejected from the synagogues. Then an increasing number of non-Jews, who had no familiarity with the Old Testament, joined this community of believers. So the Petrine Church relied more and more on what Peter and his associates told it about the new relationship with God which they said was now possible.

Imagine a gathering in a believer's house. Many of those present are Gentiles. They say, "We believe in Jesus. Tell us all about him, Peter - you knew him. Tell us a story about Jesus!"

Peter says, "Alright. Once upon a time when I was by Lake Galilee with Jesus, he . . . . . "

At the end of the story someone says, "Peter, I've got this problem with my wife. What did Jesus advise about . . . . ?"

"Ah yes," says Peter, "I remember it well because he made us learn this off-by-heart. I think Jesus was talking about this particular problem when he said: '. . . . . '" And so, as well as *kerygma* (proclamation), *didache* (teaching) was passed on by word of mouth, but not with any record of the context in which Jesus said it, and perhaps with little indication of which were the words actually spoken by Jesus, and which were words of interpretation added by Peter and those of his Party.

Not long after Jesus' death the disciples began to age, and by A.D. 60 Peter would have been in his sixties - an advanced age when life expectancy was not so great. Perhaps the memories of him and his friends were slipping a little. Perhaps they were sick. When in A.D.64 Nero decided to start

persecuting Christians he hunted down the leaders - people like Peter. So the Petrine Apostles were being wiped out. The days when you could actually find an Apostle and ask him to tell you a story were receding fast. Somebody had to write down their reminiscences as a matter of urgency.

The majority of people in the ancient world could not read or write. The privileged few who received an education used to learn, for example, the whole of Homer's “Iliad” off-by-heart, in Greek, whether they spoke Greek or not. No doubt there were many Jews who had learnt a substantial portion of the “Torah” off by heart, together with the oral tradition that went with it which, at the time of Jesus, had never been written down. They had well-trained memories. While we tend to regard information not written down as not reliable, our ancestors were not so book-centred. They lived in an "oral culture". Rabbis would gather their disciples around them and say: "This is my teaching. Repeat after me: . . " Some scholars have found there are signs in the sayings of Jesus of a poetic structure of the kind which is used in "mnemonics". In English rhyme and metre make the mnemonics memorable; in Semitic languages the technique is "parallelism": the same point is repeated in a different form. We see this in *Mark*:

"some of it fell along the path . . . . . .
Some of it fell on rocky ground. . . . . .
Some of the seed fell among thorn bushes . . . . . .
some seeds fell in good soil. . . . . "(*Mark* 4: 3- 8)
"if your hand makes you lose your faith, cut it off! . . .
if your foot makes you lose your faith, cut it off! . . .
if your eye makes you lose your faith, take it out! . . " (*Mark* 9:43-8)

Many traces of such techniques have probably been lost in the translation and editing of Jesus's spoken Aramaic into the written Greek.

Because of the oral culture, the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels is probably what Jesus actually said. The problem for Mark was that he did not know when Jesus actually said it. We can see the joins where Mark has put scraps of teaching together. We often find ourselves thinking, "That doesn't seem to follow on very well."

When it comes to what Jesus did, the issue of historical truth becomes a very real problem. Where did the person who put Mark's Gospel together get his information? Even if it did derive ultimately from somebody like Peter, this one disciple was not there all the time with Jesus, every moment of the day. And even if he did see everything, we only have his version. To what extent is Peter's version (if that is the version) coloured by his own beliefs about Jesus, particularly in a culture which had little conception of historical accuracy?

A2. BOWYER BIBLE PRINT 4286. SAINT PETER. CARRAVACCI

The earliest testimony we have concerning the formation of Mark's Gospel is that of Papias. He was a bishop who lived in Asia Minor in the 2nd century A.D. His works are mentioned by Eusebius of Caesarea, the first "official" historian of the Church who wrote early in the 4th century. Although the works of Papias (apparently commentaries on the sayings of Jesus)are now lost, Eusebius quotes from them. Writing some sixty years after Mark's Gospel was put together, we find Papias saying that Peter "adapted his teachings to the needs of the moment and did not make an ordered exposition of the sayings of the Lord." He says about Mark that "he made it his special care to omit nothing of what he heard, and to make no false statement therein." He also wrote that he himself had been told that "Mark became the interpreter of Peter and he wrote down accurately, but not in order, as much as he remembered of the sayings and doings of Christ." He also said that Mark had no personal contact with Jesus during his earthly ministry. But Papias himself was writing in the second century. There is no way of knowing how reliable his information is. "Mark", the supposed author, has a very common name. There is a Mark mentioned in some of the letters of Paul, in a letter by Peter, and in “The Acts of the Apostles”. If the author of the Gospel is this same John Mark then we know he was the cousin of Barnabas, and his mother, called Mary, had a house in Jerusalem where the early Christians used to meet (*Acts* 12:12).

This, then, is a version of what happened: Mark, who had never met Jesus himself face to face during his earthly ministry, had a very good source: Simon Peter. Peter was in Rome. For some reason the Apostle was facing death, either because of old age or of impending execution, and therefore Mark got him to recount his experiences as he wrote them down. He did this while the persecution of the Church had started under Nero about A.D. 64. Hence Mark's readers may have found stories like "The Calming of the Storm" (*Mark* 4:35-41) reassuring. Peter himself had weakened; but now, facing death, he was saying how you should trust in Jesus.

Chapter 13 of Mark's Gospel may contain a historical marker. If it is referring to actual events, then perhaps Mark was writing after the Jewish revolt had begun round about A.D. 66, but before the Temple had actually been destroyed. Perhaps Mark is saying, "First Jerusalem, then the world. If God allows his Holy Temple to be destroyed, which is the holiest place on earth, and He has allowed His Son to be crucified, surely any day now we're going to see the End." Perhaps the Jerusalem Church had fled to Galilee and was awaiting the re-appearance of Jesus while enduring the period of disaster preceding the End. The absence of resurrection-appearances could be deliberate: the instruction to the disciples to go to Galilee to await the Second Coming could reflect the flight of the Jerusalem Church in 66 A.D.

The Gospel according to Mark is, for Christians, "Holy Scripture". When they want to find guidance, the faithful may invoke God the Holy Spirit directly,

A3. BOWYER BIBLE PRINT 4282. SAINT PETER. BOLSWERT

but they also believe the Spirit may work through the pages of Scripture. The Gospels are regarded as "the Word of God". But this "Word of God" did not fall out of the sky: it was written down by human beings, and as soon as fallible intermediaries become involved problems occur.

The problem of scriptural inspiration can be avoided by cutting out "the middle man". Moslems speak with great confidence when they want to find out God's will, because it is set out in “The Koran”. They believe that Mohammed heard the Word of God directly in Arabic. The Prophet could not write so he went to his friends and told them what he had heard word for word. Then they wrote it down. “The Koran” is *literally* "the Word of God".

The Jews at the time of Jesus had a very similar idea about the “Torah”, the laws and regulations in the first five books of the Old Testament (the so-called "Books of Moses"). While they believed that Moses played a very important part in fetching them, and writing them down, these books were actually "the Word of God". They also claimed that there were explanations of the laws which went right back to Moses even if they were passed on by word of mouth. These explanations, they claimed, were almost as authoritative as the Law itself because Moses was very close to God: he had met Yahweh at the top of Mount Sinai, when he collected the laws. (Some of these interpretations have passed into modern Judaism. Thus the Jews' separation of dairy products from meat products, and their use of different pots and pans and even different parts of the kitchen, and their prohibition of dairy and meat products in the same meal, goes back to one verse which says "Do not cook a young sheep or goat in its mother's milk", *Exodus* 23:19, repeated in 34:26.) But it was not open to *any* person to say, "This Law means this," or, "It means that". It was his insistence on giving authoritative interpretations which brought Jesus into conflict with the powers-that-were.

When human intermediaries become involved the message may be in danger of being distorted because of human error. That is the situation with the Christian Bible. Believers deal with the problem by claiming that, although the Bible was written by human beings, they were inspired by God the Holy Spirit when they wrote it down. A painting by Caravaggio shows one of the Evangelists as a rough peasant. ("The Inspiration of Saint Matthew", painted 1601-2, destroyed in 1945, formerly in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin.) He looks illiterate. He has hard, work-worn hands. He is clutching a quill, and he looks unfamiliar with the use of it. But leaning elegantly over his shoulder is an angel who looks very refined and educated, and whose hand is over that of the Evangelist, guiding it across the page. That is how the Church used to picture Biblical inspiration. The Evangelists were only pens in the hand of God.

There are still fundamentalist Petrine Christians who have a very literal understanding of what is meant by "the Word of God". The difficulties of this

A4. BOWYER BIBLE PRINT 4016. PETER REPENTANT
ARTIST UNKNOWN

position are illustrated by the *cause celèbre* of Jehovah's Witnesses. Nowhere in the Bible does it say "Thou shalt not have a blood transfusion". Prohibition of this life-saving procedure is based on verses which disallow the drinking of the blood of sacrificed animals. (The prohibition is explained at length in chapter 17 of *Leviticus*.) This shows that the interpretation of Scripture can be a life-and-death issue.

At the other end of the spectrum, a commentator can be agnostic about the claim, promoted by Mark himself, that Jesus was the "Messiah" and "Son of God". The chief value of the miracles may be seen, not as authenticating suspensions of the laws of nature, but in their symbolic significance as expressed through resonances with the Jewish Scriptures, or through their implied comment on the religious attitudes and practices of the time. Few would, in fact, devote much detailed attention to the text without believing that the message embodied in the life and death of Jesus has a unique and universal value.

I believe that Jesus' chief value as preacher and thaumaturge resides in the fact that he confronted a Judaism which defined itself by exclusion: of those unable to keep the Law, or of those who were ritually impure. Coming from a cosmopolitan area which looked to the prophetic rather than Temple tradition, the Nazarene summoned Israel towards a redefinition of itself which transcended these inflexible barriers. The key to inclusion was repentance of individual sin and entry to a Kingdom where spiritual purity was not related to external physical circumstances. This radical message still raises difficult questions regarding the nature of "the True God" in relation to the God worshipped at that time by many Jews, and the world which he allegedly created.

The answers involve theological speculation of a profundity which was beyond the apostles. Mark's Gospel is the product of their attempt to place the ministry of Jesus within the Jewish mythological and ethical framework which they had inherited and which they believed to be a repository of absolute truth. The message, once liberated from these distortions, sustains a compelling challenge to our world today. But in order to recover it, we need to peel away more than one layer of interpretation. First of all, we have the editorial interpretation of Mark himself, as he attempts to place his material in a narrative and thematic framework. Secondly, and much more difficult to deal with, we have the interpretation of the Jesus-phenomenon by the apostles. And thirdly, we have the cultural and religious presuppositions of Jesus himself. Beyond all this, we find - however obscurely - the rare phenomenon of a man who was ruled by conscience, or by the Truth as he understood it, whatever the consequences for himself.

It is this which makes the quest worthwhile.

B1. BOWYER BIBLE PRINT 4848. JOHN THE BAPTIST. WESTALL

B. THE PRELUDE. MARK 1:1-13

The first words of the Gospel are: "This is the gospel." The word "gospel" is from the Old English "god spel", which means "good speech" or "good news". It is a literal translation of the Greek "eu angelion".

The Gospel begins by telling us what the book is about. Mark is not writing a biography. He is not writing history as we understand it, where the historian sets out the facts before inviting us to reach the same interpretation of events as himself. He is in fact announcing that a man called Jesus, is the "anointed one" (Greek "Christ", Hebrew "Messiah") promised by the Jewish scriptures, and everything he writes is aimed at verifying this assertion. The "facts" which he sets out are not subject to objective scrutiny: they simply reinforce a foregone conclusion.

Mark is anouncing the Good News about Jesus *Christ* - not Jesus the son of Joseph. The title "Christ" is a Greek translation of the Hebrew term "Messiah" which means "Anointed". It is a royal title, like "His Majesty". So Mark is saying, "This is about Jesus the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the One promised in the (Hebrew) Scriptures as He Who will come and be a Great King in the line of David." Mark believes that Jesus of Nazareth was this promised Messiah. He is not just saying, "There was this man called Jesus. I want to write all the facts I could find about him because he claimed to be the Messiah and I thought that was rather interesting. If I compile as many facts as I can, perhaps you could make up your mind whether you think he really is the Messiah. Personally I'm going to remain completely impartial about this one." Rather, his stance is: "This man is the Messiah. Listen to this! It could change your life! It is GOOD NEWS!

Mark goes further: it is the gospel of "Jesus Christ *the Son of God*". We do not know whether Mark believed that Jesus was literally God's son: that is, that God was his "father", and Mary was his mother. Luke appears to believe this, but Mark does not give us any stories about Jesus's birth. He goes straight into his account of John the Baptiser and Jesus being baptised. There is no information whatsoever about Jesus's life before the age of about thirty. In fact, the term "son of God" is used in the Old Testament. God is pictured in *Psalm* 2 as addressing the king of Israel as his "son". Mark probably borrowed this usage from the Psalms, believing that the verses applied to the Messiah. Without any shadow of a doubt, Mark believed that Jesus and the events surrounding him fulfilled the prophecies. The words quoted at the beginning of the Gospel are a compound from three places in the Old Testament - *Exodus* 23:20; *Malachi* 3:1 and *Isaiah* 40:3. The first part is taken from a passage in which God promises to send His angel to guide His people to the promised land: "I will send an angel ahead of you to

B2. BOWYER BIBLE PRINT 3514. JOHN THE BAPTIST PREACHING STOTHARD

protect you as you travel and to bring you to the place which I have prepared." In the Old Testament itself the Exodus from Egypt was seen as the pattern for God's future acts of redemption. The second part of the quotation (*Malachi* 3:1) itself echoes the language of *Exodus* as the prophet Malachi speaks of the coming of the Lord in judgment preceded by His messenger: "The Lord Almighty answers, 'I will send my messenger to prepare the way for me.'" The combination of this verse with *Malachi* 4:5 suggested that this messenger would be a second Elijah: "But before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes, I will send you the prophet Elijah." The Jews believed that before the Messiah came, Elijah – the honoured prophet who lived about a thousand years before Christ – would appear on earth. Mark's belief is that John the Baptiser is Elijah. (Jews still, when they celebrate the Passover, put a cup a cup of wine on the table for Elijah and leave the door open, just in case he happens to re-appear before the final Redemption.) Finally, □Isaiah□ 40:3 summons captive Israel to prepare a way for the Lord in the desert along which He will lead them to salvation: "A voice cries out, 'Prepare in the wilderness a road for the Lord! Clear the way in the desert for our God!'" It was the purpose of John the Baptiser, according to the way this quotation is used, to prepare the way for Jesus the Messiah.

Mark tells us nothing about the origins of this man. Luke says that he was a cousin of Jesus, but if Mark was writing earlier, how reliable is Luke's information? John was dressed like a wild man, obviously living off the land, eating what he could find, dressed in rough clothing. The locusts may well have been the beans of the locust or carob tree, which were used as animal fodder. In appearance John resembled Elijah: "'What did the man look like?' the king asked. 'He was wearing a cloak made of animal skins, tied with a leather belt,' they answered. 'It's Elijah!' the king exclaimed." (*2 Kings* 1:8) In both dress and diet there is a suggestion that, like the Israelites before entering the Promised Land, John is entirely dependent on God's Providence. Elijah was the original prophet of social justice: for example, in the incident of Naboth's vineyard, he condemned the greed and injustice of Ahab and Jezebel and their terrible treatment of Naboth (*1 Kings* 21). John was telling the people around Jerusalem to repent. (Note that this is not where Jesus came from: he began his ministry on his "home patch" in the north of the country.) John was preaching to "the establishment". These were the people who needed to change their ways if they were to avoid the wrath to come.

Ritual washing featured in the Temple ceremonies as a way of removing religious impurity, and we know that the sect who wrote the Dead Sea scrolls (possibly the "Essenes" mentioned by Josephus, an ancient Jewish historian) practised this ritual washing as part of their everyday routine. Perhaps John's adaptation of this rite of purification to fit in with Messianic expectations was a self-conscious imitation of a prophetic rather than priestly version: Elisha's "washing" of Naaman the Syrian, who was a leper as well as a foreigner

B3. BOWYER BIBLE PRINT 4242. CHRIST BAPTIZED. RYLEY

(*2 Kings* 5). John's aim may have been to find a way of including people in the Kingdom who had no credentials in the eyes of the Jerusalem establishment, either because of their mixed blood or their infirmities. The condition of entry was a life of moral goodness, rather than a reversal (perhaps prompted by costly sacrifices) in a condition supposedly imposed by God as a punishment for sin. John's baptism only dealt with the past, giving a "clean slate". The Messiah would propel the repentant into the future, with a baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus came down from Galilee. There was no reason to have expected a Messiah to emanate from here. Judaea was the "pure" and "orthodox" end of the country in terms of nationality, race and religion – its population had not suffered the same degree of racial intermixture from invasions and deportations as the north. Although it would be unreasonable to doubt that Jesus came from Galilee, there is no evidence that a town called "Nazareth" actually existed at this time, and the name may be a corruption of an adjective or nickname applied to Jesus and his disciples. A dove was a symbol of peace because after the Flood Noah sent one out and it came back with an olive-branch in its beak, a sign that God was no longer angry with the human race. A dove was also a poor man's sacrifice. Anyone who wanted to offer a sacrifice to God and who could not afford a goat or a bull or something expensive could buy a pigeon or dove. So it may have become a symbol for the humble man's bridge to God. There is another possible explanation. In the Temple rites a released dove (like the scapegoat) was believed to carry ritual uncleanness away with it (*Leviticus* 14:7). By having the dove return to Jesus after the baptism of John the earliest Christians were perhaps declaring that Jesus was able to receive the sins and bear them himself. In this way the Gospel begins Jesus' ministry by looking forward to his sacrifice on the cross. This peculiar incident tells us more about the beliefs of the early Church concerning the Nazarene rather than about any historical event on the banks of the Jordan; after all, who would have been able to recount a vision which allegedly took place in the mind of Jesus?

In the voice came from heaven we get a clear indication from God that this man from Nazareth is God's Chosen One. It combines two texts. In *Psalm* 2:7 God addresses the newly-anointed king as His Son: "'I will announce,' says the king, 'what the Lord has declared. He said to me, "You are my son; today I have become your father."'" In *Isaiah* 42:1 God addresses His "Suffering Servant": "The Lord says, 'Here is my servant, whom I strengthen - the one I have chosen, with whom I am pleased. I have filled him with my spirit, and he will bring justice to every nation.'" The baptism is the first occasion on which the "voice from heaven" is heard. The second time is at *Mark* 9:7, during the Transfiguration. God is depicted as happy with the situation, so Jesus can start his ministry.

B4. BOWYER BIBLE PRINT 4853. JESUS IS TEMPTED. SCHEITS

Mark gives no detailed account of the Temptations. We have to go to *Luke* 4 and *Matthew* 4 for a fuller account. These two evangelists were using a written document which Mark did not possess. It no longer exists independently. In their attempts to reconstruct it from the material common to *Matthew* and *Luke* scholars have called it "Q" from the German word "Quelle", meaning "source" or "spring".

The "forty days" are perhaps parallel to the forty years of Israel's journeyings in the wilderness : "Remember how the Lord your God led you on this long journey through the desert these past forty years, sending hardships to test you, so that he might know what you intended to do and whether you would obey his commandments." (*Deuteronomy* 8:2) The Israelites were being punished because of their disobedience to Yahweh – Jesus show instead complete obedience, leading us to the implicit idea that Jesus is acting on behalf of Israel, and putting things right with God on their behalf. The forty days may also remind us of the forty days of Elijah's journey to Mount Horeb where he received his commission for the cleansing of an Israel which had turned to false gods. As in the case of Elijah, angels are sent to minister to Jesus before his coming trials (*1 Kings* 19:5-8). It is no accident that this number has passed into Christian devotional practice: Lent is a period of forty days.

It is not unreasonable to accept that Jesus underwent a period of preparation for his ministry – perhaps even with a community who lived in the desert, such as the Essenes. The community would have subsequently faded into the background either in the wake of Jesus's disgrace and execution, or because the early Church wished to emphasise Jesus's autonomy as the Son of God.

C. JESUS GOES PUBLIC. MARK 1:14-20

What is "the gospel"? Mark tells us quite clearly very early on: the Good News that Jesus is bringing is, "The right time has come. The Kingdom of God is near." Mark talks about "the Kingdom of God"; Matthew calls it "the Kingdom of Heaven". The Jews cherished the hope that one day God would act visibly to set up His kingly rule. The annunciation of its coming was therefore truly a piece of good news: "How wonderful it is to see a messenger coming across the mountains, bringing good news, the news of peace! He announces victory and says to Zion, 'Your God is king!'" (*Isaiah* 52:7) The message now was that the time of waiting and expectation had ended and the Kingdom of God had drawn near as predicted by the prophets: "Then the one who had been living for ever came and pronounced judgment in favour of the people of the Supreme God. The time had arrived for God's people to receive royal power." (*Daniel* 7:22)

The Good News of the Kingdom, in the understanding of Mark, is not just something that Jesus announces; he brings it into being by his actions. The Kingdom means God coming to the world and arranging things according to how He wants them, not how Satan wants them. The process which Christ began is still being worked out: this is why Christians pray in the Lord's

C1. BOWYER BIBLE PRINT 4257. CHRIST CAME INTO GALILEE. PARROS

C2. BOWYER BIBLE PRINT 3543. SIMON PETER & ANDREW WITH CHRIST MORTIER

Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come", which, according to Matthew's gloss, means "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven". For some reason things are not as God wants them in the world. He does not want there to be suffering, He does not want there to be death, He does not want people to behave hatefully to one another. So Jesus has come along, has demonstrated what God wants, and at the same time has said that those who are delivered from these evils are part of God's promise that He is going to make a better world. That is the "good news": the Kingdom of God is near. But in order for God's will to come to fruition in the world, human beings have got to play their part. It is not just a matter of changing the circuits of the robot, so that we will all start behaving according to the moral laws laid down by our Creator. We have our part to play: "Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News".

Having started his ministry, Jesus goes on to choose the people who are going to help him proclaim the Good News. It is assumed that the people that Jesus called were simple working people. But there is one reason why we should doubt it: all Jewish men at that time had a trade. Jesus was a carpenter, and Peter was a fisherman. But we know that Paul was a highly educated man - a university graduate and a fluent Greek-speaker. And yet he was a tent-maker. While Peter and James and John are stated to be fisherman, we do not know whether Jesus and his disciples were educated men or not. This idea that there were just simple fishermen may have been a picture encouraged by the Church in order to emphasise the miraculous transformation allegedly effected in their abilities by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.